

Naturalist notebook

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**MARCH
1970**





NATURALIST NOTEBOOK

MARCH 1970

VOLUME VI

NO. 3

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“Spring’s First Red-Wing”
—Sketch by Martha Capizzano

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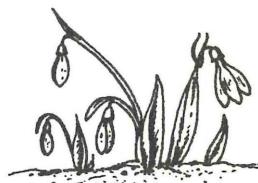
MARCH

The Month Of The First Warm Day

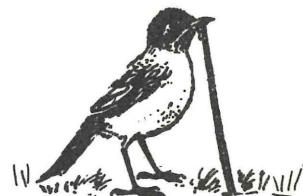
March is the month of the first warm day. Usually during the second half of March we experience one really warm day when the temperature pushes up to the 60° range. It is a wonderful day to get outside if at all possible and to observe the activities of plants and animals all around you.

Our first flowers of Spring are usually up and in bud by now. A warm day such as this is all they need to burst into bloom. Snowdrops and crocus are two flowers that will do

this. Other plants that will flower soon such as trailing arbutus can be found with swelling flower buds.

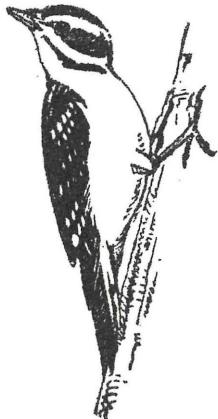
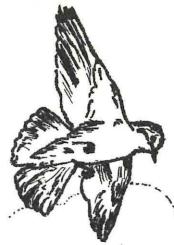


The ground is so soft underfoot that you need waterproof footwear to walk most anywhere. The ground is often so saturated with water from melting that earthworms are forced out of the ground and appear everywhere. They are welcomed by many migrating songbirds as food.



A swampy area will have many skunk cabbage in flower and the large green leaves will be pushing up alongside the flower. The warm afternoon will start the wood frogs calling in woodland ponds.

A phoebe, just up from the South may sit along the edge of a pond looking for gnats which have come out in the warmth. A handsome mourning cloak butterfly flies down the path ahead of you. Having hibernated under a log or rock all winter, the warm day has sent him out for food.

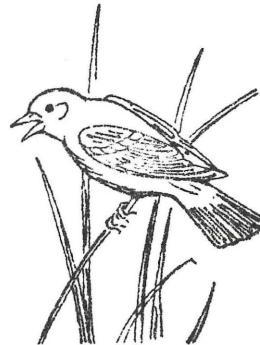


In our marshes the warmth causes the newly arrived male red-winged blackbirds to sing their familiar "Oka-lee" calls from the reeds. The sun's warmth is all it really takes to lure a few painted turtles up onto rocks in the water where they enjoy their first sunbath.



may seem like winter has returned. But that one warm day is Spring's initial stab at winter and she'll soon be here to stay.

Songs of birds are everywhere. The chickadees whistle their "fee bee" much more now. White-throated, tree, fox, and song sparrows all sing their pretty songs. Soon all but the song sparrow will have left for their more northern nesting grounds. The sounds of hammering on hollow tree trunks can be heard throughout the woods as woodpeckers drill to set up a territory.



Evening brings the calls of spring peepers by the hundreds out of the swamps and marshes. When the day ends, the temperature may drop again and tomorrow

MARCH'S CALENDAR

March is the month of melting ice and first flowers.

March 6... Chipmunks begin to emerge from their winter sleep.

March 7... An eclipse of the sun--Total if you are along the Atlantic Coast between Virginia and Florida. Partial here--Sun will be blocked the most at about 1:40 P. M.

March 8... Flickers begin to sing in forests.

March 11... First Snowdrops are in flower.

March 12... Male Red-wings are singing in our marshes.

March 14... The spectacular nightly performance of the Woodcock begins.

March 15... Skunk Cabbage is in flower in swamps.

March 16... The first Crocus are in flower.

March 17... Day and night are of equal length--12 hours.

March 18... The beautiful Wood Ducks arrive in wooded streams and ponds.

March 20... Spring begins at 7:57 P. M.

March 22... The Full Worm Moon.

March 23... The Ospreys return to their nest sites.

March 23... The Phoebe arrives from the South giving his "phe-be" call.

March 23... Spring Peepers begin the first of many nights of singing.

March 27... Painted Turtles are sunning themselves on rocks.

March 28... Tree Swallows arrive searching for early insects.

March 29... Greater Yellowlegs and Common Egrets are up from the South and seeking food in our marshes.



FOOTNOTES TO NATURE

by MARY JEAN DEWIRE

THE OSPREY

With the arrival of March, our thoughts often turn to signs of Spring and the nice warm days ahead. One such sign that is eagerly looked for by many people is the return of the osprey. Of the 89 endangered species in the United States, only the osprey, or fish hawk, breeds in Connecticut. Because of local concern and interest in the osprey, I thought it would be interesting to tell you a little bit about this bird.



The osprey, as a species, is widely distributed throughout the world and is found on every continent except Antarctica. Our American osprey, one of 5 sub-species, breeds in North America but wanders south to Central and South America during our winter months. Although this bird ranges over most of our continent it is quite rare as a breeding bird except where it establishes its colonies along the Atlantic coast.

The American osprey is identified by its dark back and light belly; it is the only large bird of prey patterned this way. The head is mostly white with a black, mask-like patch running across the cheeks. In flight, there is a noticeable kink or curvature in the long wings.

The osprey's nest, which can be found on telephone poles, power lines, cliffs, trees, or platforms is a large mass of sticks and twigs. It is added to each year for many seasons. Frequently, the bottom of the nest is used as a home by smaller birds such as English sparrows, starlings, and grackles.

Photo by R. Dewire



The female usually lays three eggs which vary in color from white to cinnamon and spotted with chocolate brown. If a stranger is seen approaching the nest, the female will rise up and begin to make loud, shrill screams. She soon leaves the nest and circles about screaming loudly; often she is joined by her mate. If the intruder tries to climb to the nest, she will swoop viciously at him, but seldom strike him.

The fishing technique of the osprey is a spectacular performance. He cruises over a body of water looking for possible prey. When he sights something suitable, he hovers momentarily on beating wings, often 50 to 100 feet high, and then plunges downward feet first to seize the fish with his talons. Rising, he shakes the water from his feathers, shifts the prey so that it heads into the wind and returns to the nest.

Let us hope that there will always be some of these magnificent birds along our coast. It would be a shame if, due to man's destruction of wetlands and use of pesticides, the osprey vanished from the earth.

IT'S TIME TO PUT UP BIRDHOUSES

by BOB DEWIRE

The temperature may be in the 20's and the ground covered with snow, but by mid-March you should get up your bird houses or, if they have been up all winter they should be cleaned out.

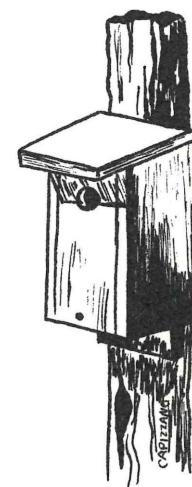
BLUEBIRDS: Perhaps the most wanted bird to use one's houses will be looking over possible nesting sites by late March. If your house isn't up, they may pass you by. The bluebird house will also be readily used by tree swallows and, unfortunately, English sparrows.

HOUSE WRENS: These small birds with the very loud song come up later in the spring--about the third week of April. They will use a bluebird house or you can make one that is smaller and restricts all birds larger than the wrens.

The dimensions for a house like the one above are given as follows:

	BLUEBIRD	HOUSE WREN
Sides (back)	6 $\frac{1}{2}$ X 12"	5 $\frac{1}{2}$ X 9"
Sides (front)	6 $\frac{1}{2}$ X 11	5 $\frac{1}{2}$ X 8
Roof	7 X 8 $\frac{1}{2}$	6 X 7
Bottom	5 X 5	4 X 4
Front	5 X 11	4 X 8
Back	5 X 14	4 X 9
Hole Diameter	1 $\frac{1}{2}$ "	1"

Wood used should be 3/4" exterior plywood. Painting is not necessary if you weatherproof. The roof or front should be screwed on so that it can be easily opened for cleaning. Don't put up a perch since it is desirable only for English Sparrows.



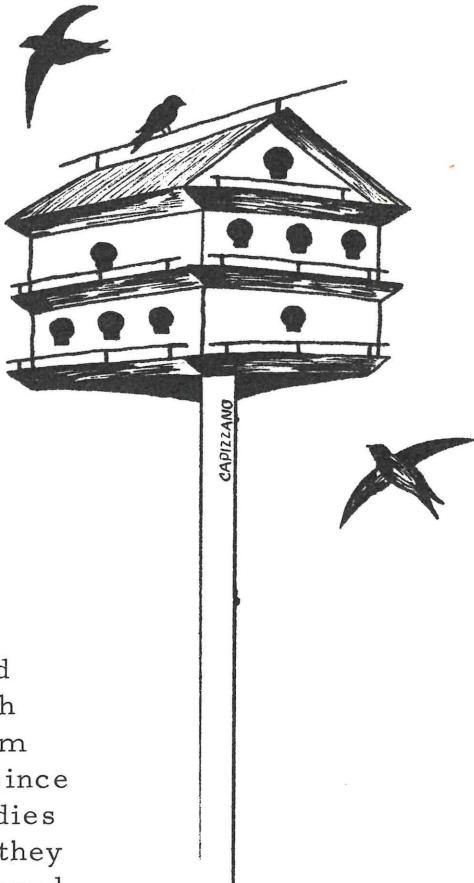
Bluebird-tree swallow houses should be put out in the open on a pole at a height of about 5 feet. Facing southeast is best as it is away from the prevailing winds and the hot afternoon sun. House wrens will nest in woods as well as open areas and at most any height.

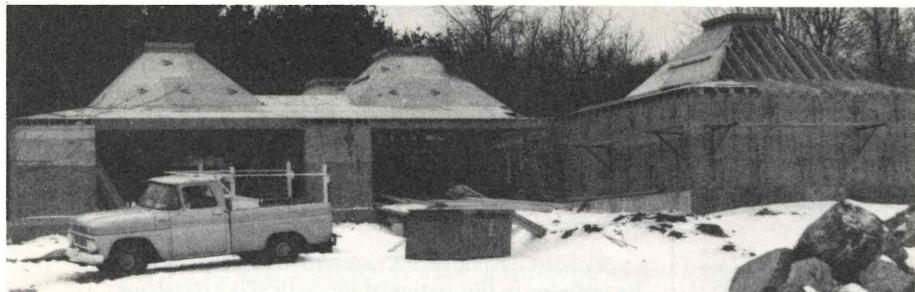
PURPLE MARTINS:

As with bluebirds, houses for martins should be up early as scouts of this species are checking locations by late March. Martins, our largest swallow, are very desirable to have living nearby since a single adult will consume at least 2,000 mosquitoes in a day.

Martin houses are very elaborate because they are colonial nesters and at least 8 compartments should be available in a house, each at least 6" square. Aluminum is the best material to use since it is lighter and cooler. Studies on martins have shown that they prefer a hole that is key-shaped with the round part $1\frac{1}{4}$ " in diameter and the square bottom $\frac{1}{4}$ ". The house should be painted white inside as well as outside. The white inside discourages starlings who prefer dark interiors for nesting. Houses should be set out in the open 12 - 25 feet up on a metal pole. Be sure you can raise and lower the pole easily for cleaning.

Whatever house you decide to try, the time is NOW to get them built and put out.





OUR NEW BUILDING: As you can see by this picture taken in early February, progress is really advancing on the Center's New Interpretive Building. At present the financial status of our building fund is as follows:

Contracted Obligations	\$147, 365.00
Gifts Received	139, 346.00
Cash Needed by June 1	8, 019.00*

*Of this, pledges totalling \$4, 275.00 are outstanding and will help meet our obligation. This leaves us with a total of \$3, 744.00 to raise by June 1st. We hope that as many of our members as possible will be able to help us reach the final goal.

LITTER PREVENTION: The Citizen's Committee to Keep Connecticut Clean and Beautiful is presenting its First Connecticut Seminar on Litter Prevention and Beautification. The program will include speakers on topics of local litter control and youth involvement, there will be films, questions and answers, and refreshments. The program will be held on March 25th at 7:00 P.M. at the Dana Concert Hall in the Cummings Art Center at Connecticut College.

SIGN OF SPRING: With Spring arriving we are hopeful that our members will be watching for various natural events to take place. Dates of flowers opening, bird arrivals, sightings of reptiles and amphibians that have emerged from hibernating, and any other information should be reported to the Center for inclusion in our "Field Notes" section.

YOUR OWN NATURE JAUNT

by BOB DEWIRE

RHODE ISLAND SHORELINE

If one goes along the shoreline in March there are many interesting spots in Rhode Island to visit. There are plenty of places to stop for lunch along the way or you may want to pack one and eat on one of the beautiful beach areas.

The sea birds are just beginning to migrate North to their breeding grounds so it is a good time to see large concentrations of them. Rhode Island has more unprotected water than Connecticut's calmer Long Island Sound and because of this the ocean-loving birds are much more numerous.

Let's start at Watch Hill--the western-most part of the Rhode Island coast and go eastward. At Watch Hill is Napatree Point; a $1\frac{1}{2}$ mile sandpit that juts westward. A walk along here will put such dune birds as horned larks and savannah sparrows on your list and is a good place to get the last snow buntings of the season. Low tide will produce good numbers of shorebirds, particularly dunlin, sanderlings and purple sandpipers. The second half of March will see the first piping plovers arrive. The large flock of brant present each spring at the point will number in the hundreds by late March.

Following the shore eastward along Misquamacut, look along the marshes for great blue herons and early arriving common egrets and greater yellowlegs. You will arrive next at Weekapaug, where the road drives along the ocean front. Common and red-throated loons and red-breasted mergansers will be offshore and flocks of scoters flying in long strings will be moving eastward. The road dead ends here, so

follow the breachway north until you get on Route 1. After travelling east a short distance on Route 1, turn right at a road marked to Quonochontaug. Go to the end where there is a parking area. Search the marshes for egrets, yellowlegs and marsh hawks. The cove alongside the marsh is a good place for Bonaparte's gulls and buffleheads. Go back down the road and take your first right. Follow it to the end where you can see the ocean. Here you will find numbers of common loons--up to 45 or more in view at once. Also present will be surf, common, and white-winged scoters. Flocks of migrating cormorants will be passing overhead.

Go back to Rt. 1 and head east past Charleston and take the turnoff for Moonstone Beach. At the end of the road, survey the marshes on both sides. Coot, green-winged teal and baldpate may be present. To the west is a large pond where numbers of Canada geese and scaup flock with smaller numbers of canvasbacks and goldeneyes.

Return to Route 1, head east and take the exit for Point Judith and Galilee. Migrant ducks in the Galilee marshes will include green-winged teal and pintails. Marsh hawks and short-eared owls may be seen flying over the marshes. It is always worthwhile to look over the hundreds of gulls around the cannery and docks at Galilee since it is an excellent place to see a white-winged gull--either the Iceland or the glaucous. Off the Point Judith Coast Guard Light there is always the chance to see such rarities as the red-necked grebes, razorbills and common eiders.

If you have taken your time and carefully checked all of these areas you will have spent most of the day and be rather tired besides. It should have paid off, however, with a rewarding bird list and a most enjoyable and scenic trip.

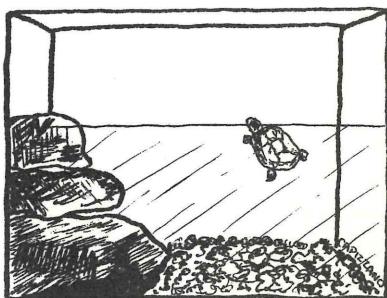
ON KEEPING REPTILES AND AMPHIBIANS OVER WINTER

by MIKE WALKER

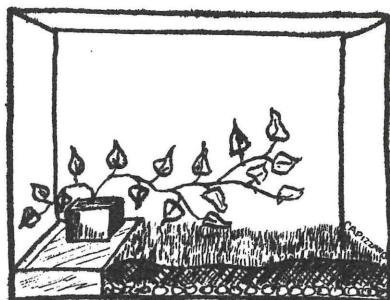
PROPER HOUSING

In addition to providing an adequate diet for reptiles and amphibians it is extremely important that they be properly caged if they are to survive captivity.

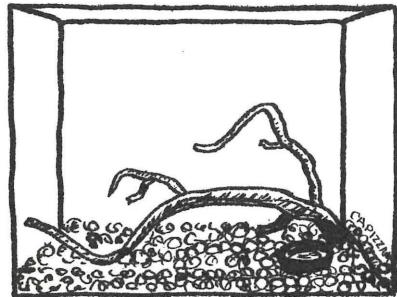
A standard fish tank of the type sold in pet and department stores makes a good home for water turtles. Cover the bottom with a thin layer of #3 or #4 aquarium gravel and stack some large rocks securely in the corner. The tank should be filled about 2/3 full and the top rock should be partly out of the water and large enough so that the turtle can completely dry off. A top can easily be made from hardware cloth cut about an inch larger than the dimensions of the tank top and bent down and crimped at the corners. An aquarium reflector with a 40 watt clear bulb will provide some heat for the turtle and illumination for the tank. It is also beneficial to submerge one of the slow-dissolving calcium-mineral blocks and two copper-producing pennies; all of which can be hidden behind the rock pile.



For amphibians and native land turtles, a combination wet-dry habitat tank is beneficial. This can be achieved by placing a refrigerator dish or plastic tray at one end of the aquarium and building up the remaining portion with a combination of gravel, dirt, and moss or sod. A hardy plant such as a philodendron can be placed, pot and all, in the refrigerator dish, which is filled with water. Again a hardware cloth top is appropriate.



For reptiles like snakes, lizards, and some hot-climate tortoises, a drier, warmer cage is essential.



My favorite method of heating a snake cage is to tape S-shaped coils of non-thermostatic heating tape (of the type used to keep outdoor pipes from freezing) to the floor of the tank and then cover them with a layer of #3 or #4 aquarium gravel. A light bulb or aquarium lamp may be substituted, but it will not provide as much heat. A water dish can be buried in the gravel and a branch or section of log can be provided for the animal to crawl on.

In all cases common sense should dictate the size of the tank. You don't put a 12 pound snapping turtle in a 10 gallon aquarium and it is extravagant to accommodate a 15 inch garter snake in a 20 gallon tank. For reptiles and amphibians, a proper diet is an indispensable adjunct to imaginative housing.

FIELD NOTES

JAN. 1 -- FEB. 15

January saw a near record cold spell with temperatures barely reaching the 32° mark in the day and dipping close to, or below, 0° each night. Bird feeders were quite active during this period and waterfowl concentrated in the few areas that were not frozen over.

Sea ducks were remarkably scarce through the period. The HORNED GREBE and COMMON LOON populations are very low this year which I would like to attribute to the oil spill of last winter which all but destroyed these populations. However, the fact that the other sea birds such as goldeneyes, red-breasted mergansers, and scoters, whose populations were not noticeably affected by the oil, are also very low in numbers this year, points out that there may be other factors than the oil which has lowered the numbers of all the sea birds this winter. We cannot conclude, therefore, that the oil was solely responsible for this year's poor grebe and loon numbers.

Winter finches in this area have become quite interesting. EVENING GROSBEAKS were quite common at feeders in early January, but the numbers dropped off sharply toward the end of the month so that there are now only a few in the area. PINE SISKINS and COMMON REDPOLLS are just beginning to arrive at feeders in any numbers and it will be interesting to see if the redpolls stage an invasion like last year. RED CROSSBILLS have made a remarkable arrival at feeding stations. A bird that rarely visits feeders, it has been reported from several stations in small flocks in Gales Ferry, Jewett City, and Waterford. This indicates that most of the normal food supply of pine cones have been used up. There were no reports of PINE GROSBEAKS or WHITE-WINGED CROSSBILLS.

Saybrook, Essex, Lyme, and East Haddam: Two SHORT-EARED OWLS were at Lynde Point in Saybrook on Jan. 17th. A BALTIMORE ORIOLE was found dead at a feeder in Essex on Jan. 12th. A YELLOW-BELIED SAPSUCKER was on Main Street in Lyme on Jan. 24th and an immature BALD EAGLE was at Selden's Neck on Jan. 12th. In East Haddam there is an adult GOSHAWK wintering at Dolbia Hill and there were two remarkable sightings of a TURKEY VULTURE--undoubtedly the same bird--along Route 82 on Jan. 3 and 10th. Two SNOW GEESE and a GADWALL were at Great Island on Feb. 1st.

Niantic, Waterford, and New London: Twenty-five BRANT were on the Niantic River on Jan. 11th. LONG-EARED OWLS were reported from a pine grove off Great Neck Road in Waterford (4) and a single bird spent all of Jan. 1st in a honeysuckle bush at Mary Butler Drive. RING-NECKED DUCKS were found in two locations on Feb. 8th. A pair were at Smith's Cove in Quaker Hill and one was at Gorton's Pond in Niantic. BLUEBIRDS were wintering along I95 near Oil Mill Rd.

Groton, Mystic, and Stonington: A female WOOD DUCK was on the Mystic River on Jan. 13th. At Eastern Point there were 3 OLDSQUAWS and a LAPLAND LONGSPUR on Jan. 24th. DICKCISSELS were reported from feeders in Groton and Stonington. A flock of 4 BLUEBIRDS were feeding on sumac and privit berries along River Road in January and a LONG-EARED OWL was at Avery Point on Jan. 10th. The YELLOW-HEADED BLACKBIRD, which has been a regular visitor to a feeder in Groton since Dec. 6th, was last seen on Jan. 31st. Six VESPER SPARROWS feeding along River Road on Jan. 31st was a large number of these uncommon birds.

Contributors to this column were: Mr. & Mrs. Kenneth Bates, Grace Bissell, Janet Boyd, Lawrence Brooks, James Clark, Tony DeGange, Bob & Mary Jean Dewire, Philip Dewire, Warren Fish, Richard Goodwin, Walter Moran, Bill Morgan, John Pillar, Paul Spitzer, Mike Walker, Bill Willetts and Mrs. Robert Yurso.

ACTIVITIES FOR MARCH

March 8 . . . 1:00 - 4:00 P.M. A Bird Banding Demonstration at the Peace Sanctuary Banding Station. Trapping and banding will be continuous and the public may come and go as they please.

March 14 . . . 10:00 A.M. A Junior Workshop for Members in Grades 4, 5 and 6. "Making a Birdhouse" Children will construct a simple bluebird house. Limit 10 children. Phone the Center to register.

March 15 . . . 3:00 P.M. Family Film Festival. Our final films of the season, we will feature "Heritage of Splendor" and Walt Disney's "Nature's Half Acre". Held in the auditorium at the Lyman Allyn Museum. Members free. Non-members 50¢ Donation.

March 21 . . . 8:00 A.M. Field trip to Napatree Point, Watch Hill, R.I. to observe migrating waterfowl, shorebirds and the Brant. Meet at the Watch Hill Parking Lot.

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NATURALIST NOTEBOOK

Published by the

THAMES SCIENCE CENTER

622 Williams Street
New London, Connecticut 06320

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The NATURALIST NOTEBOOK is published monthly. Subscription available through membership only.

The Thames Science Center is a nonprofit organization seeking a quality environment through education.

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ROBERT DEWIRE
Editor

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